

Patty Genadio
Jeffersonville, Vermont
May 14, 2023

Written Testimony on the Topic of Library Structures and Organizations:
For the Working Group on the Status of Vermont's Libraries

I was a library clerk at the Varnum Memorial Library in Jeffersonville (an incorporated village in the Town of Cambridge) from 2017 to 2021. A new library board took over in January 2021, when the Cambridge Selectboard appointed four new trustees to replace trustees who had resigned in 2020 due to the pandemic; on Town Meeting Day 2021, three of these new trustees were elected to new terms. (Two had previously served on the Varnum's board, during a contentious tenure.) The new library board created an incredibly toxic work environment at the Varnum, and within four months of Town Meeting Day 2021, our entire library team of four staff and four volunteers, representing nearly seven decades of institutional memory and experience at our library, had resigned because of the board's actions.

The Varnum is not a municipal library, but because the Cambridge selectboard has involved itself so often and so deeply in matters pertaining to the Varnum, my colleagues and I repeatedly reached out to them with our concerns. Over and over again, the selectboard dismissed or ignored these concerns.

The Varnum is an incorporated nonprofit public library with an opaque governance system. The Crescendo Club Library Association (CCLA) is the nonprofit that owns the library. The board is made up of five library trustees elected by the town (or appointed by the selectboard, in some cases) and some CCLA members. In March 2021, after our director's resignation, my colleagues and I asked Lara Keenan, then VTLIB's Governance Consultant, about the Varnum's governance structure and about other libraries with similar structures. Lara told us about two such libraries, but she said that both were "pursuing changing their governance structure to make it less complex."

In the 26 years that I've lived in Cambridge, the Varnum has had five different directors. This high turnover rate is a direct consequence of the Varnum's flawed governance structure, which leaves the library and its personnel vulnerable to the whims and questionable conduct of problematic board members. This is part of a destructive pattern going back decades. Over the past 20 years, in addition to the four library directors who have resigned from the Varnum, several other staff members, volunteers, and board members have left their positions because of troubling behavior by library board members.

My colleagues and I repeatedly asked our new board to do the VTLIB trustee trainings, but they continually dismissed our requests. The Varnum board publicly made false allegations against our library team, and continued to do so after we had all resigned; and they publicly claimed false credit for our work and achievements (grants, programs, etc.) The current Varnum board chair has ushered in greater transparency and inclusivity, but many serious issues and damaging patterns that have plagued the Varnum for years remain unaddressed and unresolved. The board's unfounded allegations still swirl around our community, and the absence of a public apology or other form of public accountability has continued to cause division in our town.

I addressed some of these issues in my July 2022 testimony to the Working Group on the topic of staffing. In that testimony, I also addressed the significant issue that conflicts of interest present to the governance of small towns and local organizations. Cronyism, nepotism, and conflicts of interest are serious problems that not only discourage citizens' participation in civic and local organizations, but also narrow the circle of people running these institutions.

Various library trainings demonstrate the many challenges that library personnel in Vermont and across the country face, especially since the beginning of the pandemic. In Infopeople's February 2022 webinar "We Are NOT Okay: Library Worker Trauma Before and During COVID-19 and What Happens Next," the webinar's presenters and many of the attendees discussed the trauma that library personnel have experienced due to difficulties with patrons, co-workers, and library boards, and how these difficulties were magnified and worsened by the pandemic.

In VTLIB's March 22, 2022, webinar "HR at Your Library: Resources and Tips To Foster Organizational and Employee Success," Gary Deziel, of the UVM Extension Service and a former public library trustee, discussed an extensive study that determined that toxic work culture is driving the Great Resignation. He said that toxic culture is 10 times more important a consideration in resignations than is the issue of compensation. Most library workers in Vermont do what we do as a vocation, and we don't expect high wages, because we know most libraries can't afford to pay better; but we also don't expect to be treated badly by the boards we serve under. Unfortunately, that kind of treatment is not rare. At the 2022 Vermont Library Association conference, my former director and I moderated the session "How staff & volunteers can learn to handle challenging library boards & library work environments". It was an interesting and informative discussion, though it was discouraging to hear that so many other librarians around Vermont have also had to deal with challenging boards.

It's been hugely disconcerting these last few years to witness the dismissiveness and hostility towards libraries and library personnel: nationwide; here in Vermont, as evidenced by the actions of the Vermont State University (VTSU) board; and right here in my town of Cambridge. But locally, statewide, and nationwide, it's been incredibly encouraging to see that many Americans support and cherish libraries. When I was helping to gather signatures for a petition against the VTSU board's plan, I was profoundly impressed and moved by the responses of Vermonters from all walks of life, professions, education levels, etc. Every person I spoke with opposed the board's plans, and didn't understand why the board would even put forward such a catastrophic proposal. Most Vermonters, especially the rural Vermonters I spoke with, understand that this plan would have eviscerated our state colleges and the communities they serve. Vermonters recognize the important role that libraries serve on our campuses and in our communities.

Public libraries provide essential services to their communities. The pandemic spotlighted the crucial work that Vermont library personnel deliver to our patrons and our towns, and showed that library personnel are essential workers. Most Vermont library workers provide these essential services at meager pay, and volunteers provide services at no pay.

Vermont's public libraries and their personnel need supportive, transparent, and accountable governance systems. I hope that the Working Group will study and consider the following suggestions:

- Mandatory trustee trainings for library trustees and other library board members
- Assistance for public library boards to help make their governance structures more transparent, accountable, and effective
- Protections and recourses for library personnel to help them cope with challenging library boards
- Standards and/or laws that would better protect Vermont library personnel
- Possible sanctions for problematic library boards
- Possible incentives and/or rewards for library boards that institute best practices such as trustee trainings and transparency
- Update and revision of the Minimum Standards for Vermont Public Libraries

More light needs to be cast on issues such board mismanagement, conflicts of interest, and egregious treatment of library personnel, to bring about greater transparency, accountability, and improvement in the management and functioning of Vermont's public libraries. It's crucial that people in positions of power and influence at the Vermont Department of Libraries and in our state government are aware of the incredibly challenging, and often toxic, conditions confronting many Vermont library workers and volunteers.

I've also served under supportive, competent, and transparent boards, and I've seen firsthand what good public library governance looks like, and the great value and service these boards can provide. Librarians and our allies can bring greater awareness to the challenges facing Vermont libraries and their personnel, and can help to generate positive changes in library governance, library standards, and library working conditions, to help our public libraries become more welcoming, more accountable, and more sustainable for library personnel and for the communities we serve.